4-12-2006

Interview with Dr. Fungchatou Lo

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Dr. Fungchatou Lo

12 April, 2006
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Dr. Fungchatou Lo in the Center for Hmong Studies conference room, 12 April, 2006

Where would you like me to start?
(0:02) Let's just start with your name.
OK. OK. My name is Fungchatou Lo.

(0:07) Where were you born, and what were your parents' names?
I was born in Laos, and my father's name is—(let's see…He died a long time ago. What's his name?) His name is Nia Her Lo. And my mother's maiden name is Mai Ya. And between the two of them they had 12 children. But six of them died, and six of us survived.

(0:35) What area in Laos did you—
I was born in Long Cheng. And my parents grew up in Nong Het province. They grew up in a time when a lot of wars and activities were going on. They always moved a lot, and finally when the Hmong people stationed themselves right along with Vang Pao in Long Cheng, my parents were among the very first group to settle in Long Cheng. The journey from Padong—my parents remembered that very clearly. And once they settled in Long Cheng, then the Americans came in right along with that, to support the Hmong's efforts of defending themselves against the North Vietnamese communists. That means gasoline became available to the Hmong people. And what happened was, on this particular night, my family just got into Long Cheng and they were trying to settle down. And they had built a little hut on this hillside where a lot of ants were coming out. So my father figured out that he would use the gasoline to terminate the ants. [Interviewer gasps] But what happened was, he accidentally tipped over the gasoline over the stove, and it caused the whole house to set on fire. And from that incident my father and mother lost two of their daughters. [Interviewer groans] And that night my mother was severely burned. It was just not a good time for them when they settled in Long Cheng, and that's one of the things that my mother remembers about Long Cheng—that they lost their two daughters that they love very much. After that—I think that must be right around 1962 or '63, and then after that my mother said it was about two years after that that they conceived me and I was born—right around 1965 or '66. They're not even sure. And so even to this day I'm not even sure how old I really am. It's either between '65 or '66.

(3:11) What's your 'official' birthday?

Official on the record it's '66. I was born, and then the communists, shortly after that—I remember we lived in Long Cheng, and I think I must have been around four or five years old. I remember briefly about Long Cheng. It's a fascinating city. We thought it was heaven, [Both laugh] because we lived on a very high hillside and looked down into this city, and we could actually see the airport, and the military airplanes and tanks and trucks. We could actually see all the activities going on every day at the airport. Suddenly—I just remember my father said, 'We have to move.' I have no idea where we have to move to, but he said, 'The communists are coming. The communists are coming, and we need to leave.' So we left Long Cheng to a village called Pha Khe, and that's where my parents-in-law lived, so I grew up pretty much in Pha Khe. And then we left Long Cheng, and my parents would go back and visit Long Cheng because they had a house in Long Cheng—but never to stay, because they knew that that was the most active, in terms of military actions, going on for the Hmong people, so that will be the first target that the communists will attack. So my father said, 'Do not live there. We'll live in Pha Khe.' So we lived in Pha Khe, and then I just remember suddenly he said, 'We have to move again.' [Interviewer laughs] And so we moved again, and now we're moving to a very small village that—I don't even know the name. But we just moved there and lived there for a couple months, and then we moved back to Pha Khe again. And then we lived in Pha Khe. And I remember then it became very—more settled. My father started to enroll me in school, and I remember the first day when we went and met with the principal. The principal said, 'So how old is your son?' And my father said, 'I'm not sure, but I think he's ready for school.' [Interviewer laughs] And then the principal said, 'Let's see if he's ready for school.' And so what he had me do was put my right hand over my head and touch my ear on the other side without bending my head to the right arm. And I couldn't do it! My hand was too short, and I couldn't do it—I couldn't touch my ear on the other side, so he said, 'Your son's not ready.' [Interviewer sighs] So I was not in school. But my father was very tricky. He had a Laotian friend who was a teacher, and then he would invite that Laotian friend over, and he said, 'You know, I'll give you some money and you take my son to be your student.' And in Laos, if someone was willing to take your child to be their student, then they couldn't care less. So I was able to get into this school through that way. And so—we called it first grade. I finished first grade, and I remember we'd go to school in the morning, and then at noon we'd have to go back home and eat lunch, and then go back again right about one o'clock, and then we would stay until probably about three or 3:30, then come home again, and then after I arrived home, then I had to go and take care of the cows. So I was a cowboy and a student all at the same time. We lived, not in the village—Pha Khe is not a village where—that is very isolated in the mountains, but it is similar to La Crosse, if you remember La Crosse, versus the metro area here. So it's a city, but yet it is not a metro city like here, or like Long Cheng. So that was my routine: go to school, come home, take care of the cows, all that. And then, when I graduated from first grade, I moved on to second grade. Suddenly, right around—I think right around February or March, we just stopped going to school—just don't go to school. The announcement came out of the loudspeaker, it's throughout the whole school saying, 'Tomorrow, don't come to school.' As students, we were happy! We were jumping and yelling and screaming and happy. So we went home! Tomorrow, no school; the day after, no school. And then a week later, we were hoping—my father was saying that, '[I'm] hoping you'll go back to school,' and we were praying, 'No, no, no school, no school!' But no school! No school after a week, no school after two weeks. Pretty soon, we started seeing strange soldiers walking around our town. And that's when everything went to chaos. My uncle, which is my mother's brother, lived in Long Cheng. And then my aunt also lived in Long Cheng with her family. My older brother was working for <u>them</u> as their driver for the family, because they were—my aunt's husband, which is my uncle,

was very active in the military with Vang Pao. So he was a military officer, and so my brother had become his chauffer for the family. Suddenly my brother just said, 'Our aunt is moving to Thailand. And all this is their stuff. And so I brought her home.' And suddenly people were just moving all over the place. Instead of going to the farm, people were going to [hiding] places. And people were crying all over town, because someone left, and then someone had to stay behind—and all this chaos just happened overnight. And as a kid, I had no idea, but then we saw these strange soldiers walking around town. And my father said, 'Those are the communist soldiers.' But actually they're Hmong! They're Hmong communist soldiers. And so suddenly we had all of these relatives that we hadn't seen for 30 or 20 years suddenly show up, and say, 'We are relative'! And my father said, 'Yeah, we are relatives, but be very careful with them. They're communists.' One of the strange things about the communist soldiers was they loved watches, so they wanted to buy watches. They loved radios, so they each would carry radios around, just like in the '80s where all these [Chuckling] punk kids would carry all of these boom boxes around—exactly that, except in Laos they carried around the small ones—with a case, too. And then suddenly, my father said, they are communists. And therefore we need to be very careful of what we do. And in addition to that, then we dug a hole in the back of our house to hide, and we would open the wall and close the wall so that they would not know that there was a hole behind our wall in the back (because our house was built on a hillside; it was slanted, and we built on the half side, so we had the slanted—in the back we had a place to duck in the house). I would imagine that at that time, most of the houses that we lived with in the village would have some kind of hiding place. And all the men suddenly became very agitated, because the communists were searching for them. And my father was not active in the military or anything, he was just in the reserve, and he was a very peaceful man, a farmer most of his life, and had a business on the side. So my father believed that he would not be in danger. So when that period of time (that was right around 1974, approaching 1975—I think it was 1975, May, at that time). People were moving, people were going all over the place, moving whether—so crazy that some people on the mountain moved down to the valley, to the city; some people in the city moved up to the mountains. And no one is knowing which direction will be safe! But my father knew that he didn't want to go to Thailand, because he had never been there. He had no idea what was going to be in Thailand for him. He knows that he will be safe because he was not active in the military, so they have no record of what he was doing. But at the same, he knows the communists. So he chose not to surrender. The only option for him is to stay away from the communists, but not to be—not to escape to Thailand. So the only option is to hide in the jungle. And so after all—from, I think it must be right around March, April, and May, that's when the chaos really started happening, and Vang Pao left Laos. And when Vang Pao left Laos, then the Hmong were left behind without leaders, or any strong leader to take care of them. So every man is for himself, and my father then had my brother married to his extended cousin's daughter. So my father's wife was my mother, and my brother's father-in-law's mother, which is his mother-in-law, are sisters in the same family—not sisters as far as from the same parents, but they are sisters in the same clan. So they are literally sisters, and we are, in a way, closely related. So my brother got married to this commander's daughter, and then my father talked to him—and he is a commander, and therefore, then, his life is in danger. But he chose not to escape, either. He was very proud of who was, and he said, 'I am going to face the communists head on, regardless of what happens.' But my father went to him, and my father said, 'You are a very brave man, but bravery will not save you. So you have to think of your family, too.' He had three wives and many children, right along with other grandkids, too. My father said, 'Let's take your family for safety right along with my family, and then you can catch up later.' So he decided to have my father take one of his wives and their children with my father, right along with my brother and his new bride, which is my sister-in-law, to a city called Na Sue. So we lived in Na Sue for a couple of months, and then the commander caught up, with his other wives

and children and possessions. Once he got there, the commander said, 'Now that you got me here, let's not stay here. We cannot go to Thailand now, because all the roads are blocked, and there's no possible way that we can get to Thailand now'—because at that time the communists already took over Laos, okay? It had become their business now. So he is out of a job, he is out of his status, he knows the reality—because just before we moved to Na Sue, then my uncle, which is my father's young brother who was in the police department during the Vietnam War and the Secret War, he was arrested by the communists in broad daylight. They came to his house, just asked where he is, who he is, and then arrested him. And then, knowing that the communists were started arresting people, particularly men who they knew that could have been in the army but chose not to proclaim themselves as such. So literally men and boys, at the age of 16 and up, were—got arrested, or they would call it 'registered for reeducation.' And the Hmong used the word *semina*. And nowadays we know what a seminar is: a seminar! [Interviewer laughs] You are going to a seminar! But what happened in the communist 'seminar' or *semina* is that you would not return! Instead of like here where, when we say we are going to attend a seminar, it's for a weekend, and you return with new ideas, right? Well, supposedly that's supposed to be the case when you go to communist seminars you return with communist ideas. But it wasn't about that at all. When you entered the seminar, then you disappeared. They either locked you up in jail in a very remote place, or they killed you, because they had found that you were among the enemies during the war. So my uncle got arrested, and then for some reason, he was able to escape. And then he sent word for his family to meet with him in the jungle. So they met with him in the jungle. And then from that my father said to my brother's father-in-law, 'You have to leave.' So that's why we moved to Na Sue. When they caught up with us, then the commander said, 'What will stop us from moving on to a safer place? Let's not stay here in the city. So he took us to a very, very small village in the mountains. So we lived in the mountains, I think roughly from '76 to '77, around that area, and then right around—because it was almost a year. That means the crops were just about ready to be harvested. Then the communists were going to attack that little mountain village, and so we had to move again! And that is the practice of the communists—by attacking the Hmong people, or the people that resisted them, at the time that the crop was about to be harvested so that they don't have food to eat, so that they will surrender, or starve to death. And that's when the mass starvation occurred for those people who chose to hide in the jungle or hide in the villages, the very small villages in very remote places. So when starvation struck us, we had to eat just about anything we could find. The best food that you could find at that time, if you were very lucky, was a yam—and corn. Not rice. Rice would be, like here—steak. So a yam and corn. And after yams and corn were gone, then we started eating roots—off the tree roots, and tubers, and anything that is soft that will keep your body moving. And you make a way of cooking it.

(20:03) I suppose sometimes you take your chances, and you discover that this food is not very good for you.

Mmm hmm, yes, yes. And you could just see that, because of the type of diet that we consumed, and you have certain roots you have to be very careful and wash over and over and over and over, until the poison is—it would dilute it, so it would not poison your body—that the river or the lake actually turned black. So when you walked into a town, the first think you look at is the water. If there are colors in the water, then you know that this tow is very—starving. It's starving for food. So you would watch for those things. And when there is a village where the water is clean, clear, you said, 'For some reason they can find food here. We'll stay here for a little while.' So from that time, we were constantly moving fro place to place, to search for food, and also to search for ways to Thailand. Finally, after many tries and moving a lot—we were constantly moving a lot and eating a lot of bad stuff—my father struck a stomach ache, and I think it became—once we got to

Thailand, it became a cancer. So finally, right around, I would say right around March 1978, then the commander, which is my brother's father-in-law, found a way for us to move to Thailand. And the reason for that was the communists were attacking our town. For example, now we are in St. Paul here, and you can actually hear the gunshots over in Minneapolis. And it's very close. So he said, 'Whether this is the right way or not, we're just going to go.' And so we just walked in the jungle. And we were among the very first groups of Hmong refugees that walked through that path to Thailand. And being the first group also means that you get lost a lot. And it means that you need to be extra careful because of the land mines. But it also meant that the communists were not aware that you were coming [that way]. So your safety, in terms of being attacked, actually attacked by the communists was lower. So we walked through the thick jungle, I think for close to a month. We literally ran out of food to eat. When we first started, if I remember correctly, we started with about 150 people, and then halfway to the Mekong River, we divided the group into three groups. And one group, they had 10 people. The other group, I think they had about 60 or so people. And the rest were staying together with our group, with the commander as our leader. And it was very good to have him as a leader, because as a military leader, he thought like a military person. He knew where to go, when to go, how to go, and when to hide. And he knew—he had a very good sense of direction. So it was very helpful. And people—with that type of person as your leader, then people listen, and people don't argue, and people stay as a group. So by the time we got to the Mekong River, our food—we ran out of food to eat, the children were crying, and at the same time, we know the communists are near, because their military base is right along the Mekong River. And so the best thing you could [do to] keep the children quiet was to poison them with opium—to keep them—to go to sleep and keep them quiet. I remember that, without knowing the power of the—amount of opium you give, you could destroy a life. So my, I believe my young sister was just like the girl there [points to a picture of a small child in the room], at that age. She was crying, and my mother put a little bit of the opium that they carried with them for medication into a spoon of water, and then forced it own my sister's throat. And then, 30 minutes later, she didn't move! And so what do you do? So after that, not only my sister, but all the children were being poisoned by opium. But one of the fortunate things was, they went into a deep sleep, but no one died. No one died. And we heard of stories that children died from this. And so we were very thankful that that amount of opium did not do much harm beyond keeping the children asleep at that time. So we—we're not only starved for food, but we're also starved for water, because the water also ran out, and by the Mekong River, there is no water! The only water is from the Mekong River, and we are not there yet! It's a half day to go. But when you get close to the Mekong River, for some reason, from the area that we came through, there was no water, so we ran out of water. By the time we got to the Mekong River, it was that night that we heard gunshots—about, I would say about—we got there right about 11 at night. About 12 at night, 12 o'clock, we heard gunshots about a couple miles back, and we knew that it was the other group. We did not know how severe that event was, but we learned later, after we got into Thailand, only one person survived out of that 60-or-so group of people, of that group. The other 10 people, that came with a smaller group, they got to Thailand safely, but the other group of 60, all of them got eliminated with that ambush. Only one person survived. So that night, we got to the Mekong River, and we didn't know that the place, or the area that we arrived at, the Mekong River is split into two. There was an island. So we only got to the small side of the river, and then there is another island, and then the big side of the river is still on the other side. So we got to the river, and then the commander said, 'It is very strange. How come the Mekong River is so small? There must be something wrong here.' So he said, 'Let me go first and see what happened.' So he asked us to go back, to walk back for about—I think it would be about three miles—and we hide for the night. And he, along with my cousin, would swim across the Mekong River to Thailand, on that side, and then buy a canoe, and then bring the canoe back to

transport the people. And they said, 'Tomorrow night, we'll be back.' So while they were making it across the Mekong River to Thailand, and we were left behind, then—it is so strange that—I think there is a, some kind of a—the Hmong believe that there is some kind of forces that protect you—they would say spiritual forces that protect you—at certain times. Well, while we were waiting during the daylight, like this, and at the place where we were waiting for them to return, we actually heard the communists or soldiers come and approach us, and we had to stay very quiet. Now just imagine about 70 or so people or 80 people, hiding together, and hearing people coming, searching for them. But they didn't see us. And so it was, for me, it was a miracle that they didn't see us. Otherwise we all would be dead. So when that event passed by, then we waited until the night, then we went to the river and waited for them to return, but they didn't return! So we had to go back again, find the same place again, without food, without water. And so we stopped for two days—two days, two nights. The second night we went back to the river again, and it was about midnight. That when they arrived—with a canoe. And they told us that the place where we were waiting there, the Mekong River split into two. So that means we have to—they have to use the canoe to transport us twice. So they—the only person that knew that knew how to paddle a canoe was my cousin! So he would be the only one paddled—used the canoe and transported all of us, 80 or so people, across the channel. And then once we made it across the first channel, then we had to run across that island about—I would say about a half mile—and then another channel of the Mekong River comes through, and we had to be transported again. Bu what they did was, when they were at the Thailand side of it, and met with the Thai—the mayor of the town, they said, 'We can only transport our people from the first channel, across the first channel, but we want you to help us transport them across the second channel—and we'll pay you for it.' So the Thai canoe, the Thai people with their canoes, were already waiting for us on the second channel. So I remember that when we were—when we made it across the first channel, onto the island, and then we ran from th-across the island was the longest journey that I ever remember. If you ever ran on sand, [you know] the harder and faster you run on sand, the deeper your foot goes down. And so we literally had to run and drag each other across that island to the other channel, and then when were at that channel, then the Thai would come with their canoes and transport us over.

(31:48) And this is just a flat island—there's not much cover or anything, I assume, to disguise your movement?

Right, right. The only thing they had was banana trees, but it was—the banana was so tall, that you didn't have any place to hide. But one of the fortunate things at that period of time was it was during—I believe it was during the water festival, or some kind of festival, that—even on that island was the military base for the communists. They were all gone to celebrate the festival, festivities, and so there was nobody guarding the base! And so we came through and they didn't know!

(32:31) Now what is the water festival?

It's sort of like a national baptism. [Laughs] Yeah, once a year the Laotians would do this national day called the water festival where they're washing the nation. And so they just throw water at each other, celebrating. That's why I call it the national baptism of—not holy water, but just washing—literally washing your sin away! Because the monks from the temple get (***) and all that. So the communist soldiers went to celebrate this festival, and at the very least, I would say they had very few people at the base, so they didn't even bother to look around, and so that is why we were able to make it across the island safely. And all the people in our group made it to Thailand. And once we got to Thailand, then we had to pay the Thai people a certain amount of money, and I have no idea how much the amount that each family has to pay, but I knew that if you could not pay, I would

have to pay for you. And—family helps each other out that way. And then we all make it—repay later.

(33:59) Now let me—if you don't mind, I'm just curious—if we could back up for a little bit and talk about you growing up in Pha Khe…For—I think especially for students who grew up in this country and who don't really understand sort of the lay of the land and what it was like to live in a reasonably large village like Pha Khe. What was life like for you there?
Again, I was a cowboy [Interviewer laughs] and as a Hmong child, I believe that everybody had chores at home, responsibility at home. It was a very pleasant village. We – I would say that it was a diverse community because we had Hmong, Yao, Laotian and the Lao Theung living next to each other. And we – my father was a businessman as well as a farmer and my mother was also the same. And I would help with the family right along. We played games very much to keep us active in the community with other kids.

(35:07) Sure. What kinds of games would you play?
I don't even know the names. [Both laugh]
Well, what would be an example of an activity, if you didn't put a name to it, how would you spend your time?
You know, the American kids also play it here, where you draw chalk on the ground with the …
Uh-huh, hopscotch?
Hopscotch, that's one. We would play the rubber band game where you actually win – try to win each other's rubber bands. Or we played the marble for the boys. Marble was a very big one. We played the hold your breath game and then you tag someone.
You tag someone when they've let their breath out?
No, you have to chase someone with – chase someone while you're holding your breath and tag them and then they – it's their turn to hold their breath and chase someone and tag them.
Did anybody pass out playing this game?
No, when you passed out, then you were – you continued to be it. Sort of like playing 'it'. And—but growing up in the Hmong community, boys always mostly played together. Girls played together. Our parents taught us that. Boys had boys' games. Girl had girls' games. You don't mix the gender at – even during time of play. So, we grew up with a gender identity [that was] very clear. Okay? There was no confusion in there. Girls grew up, I remember, as a girl, then you grew up in the kitchen with your mom. As a boy, you grew up with your dad, watched what he did, watch what he does and you do that. So, in that village, I know for sure that my mother was raising her daughters to become a good wife – to become good wives for a future husband. My father was raising me to become an educator. He always talked about, 'I want you to become a doctor.' That's what he – was on his mind all the time. And at the same time, he said, 'Watch what I do and you do. Okay? I don't want to teach you, but watch what I do.' And so, that – our teaching from our parents was literally hands-on, watching, hands-on. And so, when you marry someone, you know that they're all ready to be your mate and to be a helper, to be your wife, to be a husband. Unlike nowadays, where you marry someone, but you don't have a wife or you don't have a husband. Okay? You marry someone because you love him or her. That's it. And then, the responsibility of being a wife and a husband comes together and then you struggle. And then, when you cannot deal with the struggle, then you say, 'Oh, I give up.' That's what the difference [is] between Hmong marriage – successful Hmong marriage and non-successful Hmong American marriage. Okay? Because we grew up differently than our kids now. And we try to instill our daughter [with] that value. Even now, she's only eight years old. We say, 'You need to cook. You cook for your mom and dad. You clean your bed. You clean the dishes. You vacuum the floor. You're taking care of

the house. Because these are the skills that are essential for your marriage. We know that you [will] become a very professional person. But yet, at home, this is what's needed. And now, our kids don't get that. So, growing up in Pha Khe, it was a wonderful time because we had a run through the border of the village and everybody would go to the river to be washed or to – there's no fishing, there's no fish, but we go there fishing all the time! [Both laugh] As a kid, you go fishing all the time and no fish, but the river is a very common place where to go meet together and do activities such as washing clothes and getting water for the garden. So, I remember one of the most important thing growing up in Pha Khe is gender identity – it's always very clear.

(39:32) Sure. Was your family already Christian when you were young or was that a faith that came to you later in life?

Oh, Christianity became part of life when we arrived in the United States.

Well, what do you remember then about your animist traditions, back when you were living in Laos?

My father was a shaman. My father was a shaman. I watched a lot of thing that he did and I – being that I grew up in a time where things changing, but yet I'm also – becoming aware. And I remember things and I'm among the very fortunate, very few people who are fortunate enough to remember those memories. I remember my father was a shaman and he would tell me of his technique. And he – techniques meaning there are certain things that the assistant to the shaman needs to do at some point in the ceremony. So, if, let's say, someone came over and asked my father to go and perform a shaman ceremony and they have never seen my father perform, they don't know when to burn the paper or when to start beating on the drum, or when to beat the drum. So, my father will say, 'Take my little son along and he will tell you.' So, I would go along and I would sit and with – so, my father would perform and, for example, you would watch and you would guide and would be banging on the drum and I would tell you, 'Okay, now you start because my father said so in there. You start. Okay, now my father say burn the paper. So, you will burn the paper.' So, I would – I became very much part of who – my father's shamanism practice. And I know some of the details behind shamanism. I also know that certain times, certain events needed to happen and that became a very useful understanding of Scripture for me, because I could relate that into the Scripture. And I said what is God? Where is God? And why are we doing this? Even though we are doing this, there is – where is God in here? Where's the power in here? And then, I understood then that there's no power. There's no God. But what we were trying to do is mirror what the Jewish did in the Old Testament. Like the shaman wears the veil. Now, who wears a veil in the Old Testament? Moses wore the veil in the Old Testament. So, the Hmong shamans, for some unexplained reason, have acquired that skill of when you go to speak with a spirit, the high priest, which is the shaman, wants me to be appointed by the spirit. Two, needs to wear the veil. And then communicate with the spirit. And then bring back messages to people—very similar to shamanism. The shaman needs to be called by a spirit to become shaman. Once you become a shaman, then you need to wear a veil when you speak to the spirit. And whatever you gain as far as the message you got for the spirit, which is coming in your heart, you can read that message to the people. Very much like Moses in the desert, where the – where they build the tabernacle and Moses is going to approach the place of the Holy of the Holies and he put on a veil. Meeting with God in the back – the spirit of God in the back and then came back and then put the veil on. And then, when he lifted up the veil, his face shined. And people say, 'We cannot look at you. Just tell us what God told you.' Okay? And the Hmong still do that. The Hmong still do that. The Hmong still do the sacred ceremony. It is today and so these thing – my experience with my father as a shaman now helps me to help – it helped me personally to understand why I need Christ. And it helped me to be a better missionary to my people, because I can talk about their religion, our religion, and I

could say to them that this is where yours ends. This is where Christianity comes in and we need that. No matter what we do here on earth, we'll never get to heaven.

(44:40) Sure. Interesting. Could you just sort of walk me through one of the ceremonies that your father performed as you remember it? As you say, you sort of sat in and provided cues to people.
Okay. Yeah.
What would that look like, as you remember?
Okay. I remember one activity. It's called the choosing who – choosing or investigating – a better word would be investigating the cause of an illness. So, you would use a bowl of water and it would sit on a very low stool and then put – at the front door, inside the house, near the front door – put three chopsticks, very sharp on the edges – okay? And he would hold – for example, this the water, the bowl of water. And the bowl of water, it's in there, the water in there. You would put the three sticks right in the middle and then you would talk about the spirit. If this is the spirit that causes illness, please hold the three sticks here, straight up, and you would let it go. And if the three sticks there stand up straight without any support, then whatever spirit you named at that time that the three sticks that are standing, that's the spirit who caused that illness. So, that's one of the ways that they use this bowl of water and the three chopsticks – I call it chopstick – to diagnose the spirit. I remember one time my father did that, and then I said to myself, 'I could do that, too.' So, after my father was finished, I took my bowl. I was a very young kid, right about, maybe, I would say, at that time, I was about seven or eight. I would go to the same place. I would do the same thing because when he was doing that, he would also put water on the top of the straw or the sticks there, too. And then, pretty soon, I – without saying anything, my three—the sticks also stood! And I said, 'Dad, look, look, look! I did what you did, too.' And he said, 'Son, your – the difference between yours and mine is yours has no spirit.' So, what did we learn from that? We learn that with patience, the sticks will stand. Okay? And what that translated to, that we believe in something that's not really there. But because it happened, that we choose to obey. And so, when my father did something, I tried to do – another prediction is also this. You would split the bamboo into very fine threads and then you would tie – you want to make sure that there are an even number in the threads. So, you would tie them together in the middle as a bundle, in the middle, where you don't – you cannot tell the difference between the thread going through. And you have the two threads out in the open and the knot goes in, sort of like this and go in, go out – it's hard to draw – I should draw. Anyway, the trick is this. Then you think of what the cause is. And then you tie this end, each – you put the through – tie two threads together, two threads together and then you also tie this thread together, two threads together, two threads together and then you untangle that – the knot in the middle on tracking that and untangle it that. And then you see if it becomes a perfect circle or it becomes a mismatched or entangled circle. The more difficult the threads become, that means the severe or the tragedy, the higher the tragedy you will face. Again, I did as my father did, and he – after he's finished, I would do my little bamboo threads and I would tie this and it was a bad looking thread. My bamboo thread, perfect circle. [Both laugh] So, these days the Hmong believe in things that they don't see and they put their trust in there, so much so that luck could take over. And that's why, when I grew up, I still questioned these things. And particularly when I became a sociologist and historian, then I wanted to search for the truth. If I wanted to remain a Hmong person, practice the Hmong religion, I wanted to know that you cannot trick me. Okay? If you are a shaman, you come over. I know that – I know what you know and you'd better tell me the truth. How could I do that? And the answer was to study it. So, I studied the Hmong religion, the Hmong culture, anything that man is supposed to know, I studied it. And it came to me, like I said earlier, no matter what we do here on earth by ourselves, we cannot get to heaven. That's one of

the shortfalls of our Hmong religion. We always ended up in a place where we're going to starve to death again and suffer again. And then I said, 'Is there a better place? Is there another promise beyond this?' Only Christianity said, 'through Christ there's paradise for you.' And then so, as an educated person then I said, 'I want to study about Christianity.' And what's unique about Christianity is that you always—all are sinners. You – what you do is not good and what God has done for you is perfect. And that released me of my responsibility as I tried to do – I tried to do, to earn my way to heaven. Now, instead of doing that, I do that, I try to be a good person, because I'm a Christian. And it's not about my salvation depends on what I do, but what I do defines the love of Christ for others. So Christianity has never been part of our family. It was only after we arrived in the United States, when we were sponsored by Christian families and saw the love they had for us, and understood that there had to be some reasons behind this love. And that is why we are trying to do the same for the new Hmong refugees now. Certainly, we'd love them to become Christian, so we help them. But that is up to God and them. So, what we do is we collect furniture from our congregations in the district and have them come over and take the furniture, clothes, whatever we can provide them, and we pray that they will see, they will ask the same question – why are these people doing that and why those people don't do that?

(52:30) Well, let's pick up the thread of our story again. You've made it safely to Thailand now. How many members of your family have survived the trip?

My – let's see, my father, my mother, myself, my two – three sisters, my aunt and then my brother's wife and their daughters. So, it's about, let's see, seven, eight, nine – nine of us made it to Thailand. And then once we are in Thailand, we – the Thai government, after they registered us as refugees, then they took us to the refugee camp. It's called Nong Khai – Nong Khai camp. And we were then, living with our aunt [***] and uncle who were Christian. And then, there was the first road of the refugee camps – apartments – there were twelve roads, the first road, I think the first road was Christian, for the Christians. They had a church. So we, I think that also had an influence on us, too. We got to Thailand and then, now, you have to be at the age of 12, then you – I think you get two or four – four kilos of rice. If you are below the age of 12, then I think you will only get one or two kilos of rice per week. So, my father said, 'It looks like you are 12. So, we'll make you twelve'—to gain more rice! So, that's how my birthday was established. So I was 12 when we got to Thailand. Whether I was 12 or not, made myself a 12-year old kid. And I remember that, in Thailand, the food was not enough. We only received food, I believe, once a week. And once a week, you would receive rice. Once a week you would receive vegetables. Once a week, then, you would receive meat. So, they rotated like that. And we got so hungry that we went to the garbage hill and dug out whatever we could find from the garbage hills and took it home and ate it. I remember that my father said, 'Son, we're not going to stay in Thailand. We are here. We're going to move on. So, I don't want you to attend Thai school and waste your time. But attend English school, learn English as much as you can.' But where's the money? Because without money you cannot attend English class and all the English classes were private lessons. So, I would attend private lessons for English, off and on, off and on. And as a young kid, I wanted to play more than go to school. So the only two words of English that I knew were, most of the time, was yes and no. And then, we lived in Nong Khai for half of the year if – I remember, I think, half of the year, about a year. We got to Thailand in '78. And then, right about the end – the end of '79, then we were transported – all the Hmong were transported from Nong Khai to Ban Vinai. And all the Laotians in Ban Vinai were transported to Nong Khai, because there was so much animosity between the Laotian refugees and the Hmong refugees that they said, 'It safer to separate the two groups.' So, all the Hmong from Nong Khai moved to Ban Vinai and all the Hmong – all the Laotians in Ban Vinai moved to Nong Khai. So, once we got in to Ban Vinai, then my father started to become very sick

and I think about two weeks after we arrived, he died from stomach cancer. He could not – his stomach could not digest whatever food went into his stomach. He was always throwing up and getting it out. So, he was very ill and he died. And then, I believe, about a couple months later, four or six months later, then my young brother, my baby brother, who was born in Ban Vinai, shortly after we arrived, also died. So, my mother lost two of the people that she loved the most – my father and a young baby. Two months after my young brother died, within six months after my father died, then we got permission to come to the United States. And that was in May of – no, not May – it's either – March of '7– no, March of '80 – 1980. And so, we got permission to come over to Minnesota, here. And I remember we – when we arrived, the snow was still out there and we thought we were in hell, [Both laugh] because the Hmong religion says hell is very cold. Very cold. And so, we thought we were in hell. And my uncles, I remember, telling me that, 'No, we're not in hell. This is called snow here.' And in fact, we don't have a Hmong word for snow. We have to invent it while we're here. And so, we couldn't invent a new word for snow, so we started with the word snow. Yeah. And the Hmong have a word called te, but it's frost. Yeah, yeah. So, it's not as extreme as snow. So, we got – we arrived here in March, in Minnesota. In fact, we lived down the street.

Oh, really.

Do you remember the two red apartments at the corner of Lexington and – what is this street right here?

Concordia? Concordia Avenue.

Yeah.

Well, sure, right on the – yeah.

Yeah.

They've torn them both down. There's a big garden.

Exactly. We lived in the middle one.

Okay.

That was our first house, our first apartment in the United States.

Interesting.

And the reason that we lived there was our uncle said, 'You live here because you can walk over to the store.' We had the big country owl. The owl country …

Oh, the Red Owl – yeah.

Yeah, the Red Owl.

(59:22) The Country Store.

The Country Store there. You could walk over and shop in there. And at time, this whole University Avenue was – had no Asian market. But only at Lexington and University Avenue, there was a little Korean grocery store there. So, he said, 'You go to the Korean store here. Then you go to American store there. And you just walk home. And then the school bus will take your kids to Highland Park Junior High.' We lived there for half of the year and I remember it was – life was so hard on my mother. She could not read and write in Hmong or in English. And she would just learn how to sign her name. It was difficult because she needed that to get her refugee cash assistance. Yeah. Then she started to go to school, but when – since she came home, she cried and she cried everyday. Cried every day because she missed her baby son, my father and now she lives in a new environment where she doesn't know where things are. And we kids were gone all day at school. So, it was very hard for my mother. Finally, my brother ended up living in Fennimore, Wisconsin, sponsored by a group of churches.

What's the name of the town?

Fennimore.

Fennimore? Oh, okay. Yeah, okay. I think I know where that is.
Yeah. A very small town. And so, he said, at that time, in 1980, the Hmong population, the Hmong refugee population is just about to be on the increase. So, we had – we went to school, but yet we spent all day with the Hmong children in Highland Park Junior High. So, my mother said, 'We need to move someplace else where it will force you guys to learn English faster.' So, we moved to Fennimore with my brother-in-law – my brother and his family. So we moved there. The population of the town was 2,000. We were the only Asian – minority Asian and Hmong family in town. So, the people did not know how to interact with us, did not now how to communicate with us. The only people we could communicate with were our sponsors. And I remember I went to school and I would not be able to talk to anyone for days, for weeks, for months. And on top of that, not only that – because it was my language barrier, there was also my culture barrier. I was more mature than they were. I would behave like the teacher, but I could not communicate to them and therefore my English became very low at the elementary level. They – I would sit in with them for – in the eighth grades, ninth grades and read at their age level, but sitting in class with them, next to them, I would read the first grade level. And it was becoming very hard on me because even when I was reading – my reading was very low at third grade level, their behavior was lower than my reading level and I could not relate to them. So, after a year, then I– after six months, then the spring season came. Then, my – our sponsor said, 'You know, you may want to think about making friends. And one of the ways to make friends is to join some sport in school.' So, I say, 'Okay. I could do that. I don't know what to do, but I will try.' And I remember my sponsor say, 'Why don't you go and talk to your guidance counselor?' I went there. The only sport left over for me was cross country.
Oh, boy.
And I said, 'Okay, if that's what it takes to make friends, I'll do that.' And no one ever told me that you needed the proper gear. So, being that we're new refugees, new to this country, very poor in terms of financial status, I would wear whatever shoes I had for the day to run. And I remember my coach looked at my shoes and he said, 'Come here.' I walked over. He squeezed the bottom of my shoes and he just shook his head, like that. And then my shoe was, to me, if you have a shoe, it's good! But for them, it had to be Nike or some other brand name where it's a running shoe, it's light and soft on the bottom, so you can run longer. Mine was pretty much just like my boot here and I thought. 'these are good shoes.' And I couldn't survive. I couldn't take it because cross country, that means you're – it's long distance running. And pretty soon I said to myself, 'You know, I've been running from the communists all my life! Why would I run here? [Interviewer laughs] It's time for me to settle down!' So, I just quit. I quit the cross country team for the very fact that I did not have the proper gear. And no one ever told me that, not even my coach. Not – on top of that, we don't have the financial means to have – to give me the proper gear. So, I quit that and then the following year, my sponsor said, 'Try it again. Try a new sport.' So, I – this time I make sure I go early. So, I went early and the guidance counselor said, 'Have you ever tried baseball?' And I said, 'I have no idea what baseball is.' So, he showed me that baseball is when someone throws you the ball and you use a bat and you hit the ball and when you hit the ball you run. And I said, 'That's sounds fun.' The other thing I said was, 'Does it demand a lot of running?' And he said, 'No, it does not demand a lot of running. When you hit the ball, you just run and you stop.' And I said, 'Okay, I like that idea.' No one told me, explained to me the rules of the game! I didn't know what I needed to do to win the game. All I know is 'catch the ball, grab the ball, throw to first base.' And then, when it is my turn to bat, watch the coach because he's going to give me a sign whether to hit or to bunt. Right? That's all I need to know. And when I hit the ball, run to first base. [Interviewer laughs] That's all. So, I went to the meet and the coach, after all the guys came in and they all know what they're doing. They have all their gloves on them. I don't even have a glove. I don't even know

what – how to get one. And then, my English – remember, my English was very low. If you speak it at my pace now, I wouldn't understand you. So, my coach talked to me. He was – spoke very loud, sort of like I'm deaf or something. Sort of like the louder he is speak to me, the clearer I will get it. So, he asked me, 'What would I like to play?' And I said, 'Ball.' And then, after a while, he said, 'Position.' And I don't know what position is. So, he just looked at me and say – at that time, my name was [Tou] from Chatou – the last three letters – Tou. He said, 'Sounds like two, so I'll put you at second base. [Both laugh] So, I ended up playing second baseman. And he said, 'All you need to do is when you get the ball – okay – throw to first base. That's it. That's your job.'

Yeah, right.

And so, I say, 'I can do that easy enough.' And then, the funny thing is I played with – I loved the game. I loved the game because it didn't demand much of running. It's a teamwork, but yet it's individual effort as well. And I joined the game, the team and we won some, we lose some and, at the end, I was voted to be the most improved JV. Twice a year, but never knew the rules of the game. Never knew the rules of the game. I don't know when we're going to end the game. I only know, okay, we start the game. And then we play it, but I don't know when to talk about innings. I have no idea what they're talking about. [Interviewer laughs] So, after that, after two years, I did not make any friends. But only, the one thing that I made was a name for myself. Not that I made it, but they made it for us, for me. They called me the Hmong man. Now, it has two different meanings. The Hmong man can mean that I'm proud of who I am. I'm a Hmong person and I've become a man. And so, I'm proud to become Hmong man. But I did not – and I took it that way. But later, when I looked at how my classmates interacted with me, it was a sign where they labeled me, said this person is different. So, nobody wants to play catch with me, because when we practice and it's about time to play catch, no one wants to play catch with me! And they, 'Okay, who's taking the Hmong man?' And no one. So, after two years, my family decided that, 'You know, I think we had enough of a small town.' So, we moved to La Crosse and joined with my uncle's family, my uncle's meaning my father's older brother and his family in La Crosse in 1983. So, we lived in Fennimore in 1981 to 1983. And in La Crosse, it's when the Hmong, in '83, that's when the Hmong started to resettle themselves all over the United States. They knew that it was not like in Laos where the communists take over and you cannot move, and whenever you move, you have to have permission. In United States, the only permission you need is money, and you can move. So, they try to move. At that time, in – between 1980 to '83, you would find Hmong in Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Ohio, Maine, Rhode Island, all over the United States. Montana has a big Hmong population. But in 1983 to 1985, the Hmong started to resettle themselves all over the United States to certain areas. So, they ended up – California, Minnesota, Wisconsin. California for the weather. It's warm all year around. And it's very similar to Laos in a way. Minnesota because it has the best education system and it is also located in two major metropolitan areas where we said we lived in Minneapolis, but yet you are over there. You live in St. Paul, but yet you're over there. So, you live in very close proximity together with your relatives. And Wisconsin is because, similar to Minnesota, good education, good mental health, good welfare system and, at the same time, good weather. You need winter – winter keeps the children in school. [Interviewer laughs] So, and yet, people live all over the state where you live in small communities, but you can travel one to two hours and you're there. So, they like that. And – but the bottom line is the welfare system and the education system were the main drive for the Hmong in Minnesota and Wisconsin. At that time, the only thing on our mind as children is 'get degree, get education.' And so, we work hard. Lee Pao was visiting my family in La Crosse, too. We knew each other when we were growing up in high school. And the only thing, yet again, the only thing on our mind, at that time, for adolescents and youth? Education. We'd compete [against] each other with education because we—in Laos, we never had that much of opportunity to pursue an education. And that desire instilled in our parents'

minds and then instilled in us, too. So, we worked hard on that one. So – but the problem was no one knew what college was because no one had gone to college yet. So, if I want to go to college, who should I talk to? I talk to my guidance counselor. They said, 'It looks like you'd do well in technical school.' And then you say, 'Okay.' In fact, that's what happened. I talked to my guidance counselor and he said, 'What do you like to do?' And I just – I had no idea, but I looked outside and said, 'Well, it looks like that wire needs work. I want to work on the wire.' And he said, 'Then you should become an electrician.' And then, he said, 'Here is the technical school.' Their minds were not beyond higher learning. It only geared us toward blue collar work. And so, when we moved to La Crosse, we met other Hmong people. We had some older Hmong men that were also in college. They came in and talked to us about, 'there's more to technical college than you think.' There are colleges, four years and more of that and get your doctor degree. And at that time that we had Dr. Yang Dao move from France to the United States and he helped shape us – he helped shape us up. He said, 'Kids, think about higher education.' I remember one other thing he said. 'Don't desire the car now. Don't desire the house now. Get your education. The car and the house will come later. But if you get your house, your cars now, you – chances are your education is not going to come after.' So I remember he say that and that was on my mind – get a good education. And right there I said, 'I want to get a degree. I'm going to fulfill my father's dream of wanting me to become a doctor.' But at the same time, I have no idea that there's so many doctors – different kind of doctors. I'm not good at science, but what I'm good at is listening to people and talking to people. I'm a very articulate person. So, after majoring in just about all the majors in La Crosse, in UW - La Crosse, my cousin said, 'You know, you might try social work. It's not like what we are learning. It's more about human beings—their feelings, what they went through. And so, I tried the Introduction to Social Work and I loved the theories. I loved the concept of it and I loved what they do. So, I declared my social work after trying business, politics, economics, biology, psychology, sociology, history – all that – and music. I even tried to become a professional singer. [Laughs] So, it didn't work, so I become – began to focus my study in social work and so I got my undergraduate degree in social work from La Crosse. After that, then I couldn't find a job in the city that would pay well enough. At that time, if you made $25,000 – very good. But a $25,000 job means graduate school. So, I went to talk to the La Crosse school district and their personnel director actually said, 'You know, if you get that masters degree, I think we could do something about that.' So, I said, 'No problem. I'll go get that.' [Interviewer laughs] I remember I walked out of his office, filled out my application the next day. Sent it off to UW-Madison and then to UW-Milwaukee. Both of the schools accepted me to go to their graduate school. I really wanted to pursue in marriage and family therapy, but they did not give me the grant to do it. I had to literally pay my way through it. With UW-Madison, then they gave me a stipend to go to their graduate program and I could study mental health or I could be come a school social worker. So, I really liked working with families, so at that time, I said, 'I'll go to school – counseling, school social worker – because if you are licensed as school social worker in the state of Wisconsin, you could work anywhere. You could work in the county or the state or in the school. But if you were not licensed as school social worker, you could only work in nonprofit organization or agent – a private organization or county or state, but not in the school. So, it limits your opportunity. So, I chose to study school social work and got my license as a school social worker through that. And within a year, I finished all my graduate work. I came back with a masters degree and, sure enough, they let me a job. They get me a job in the district as their bilingual school social worker.

(01:18:35) So, this is back in La Crosse.

Back in La Crosse in 1992. And then, I was so happy, I thought my life was set. Wow, this is a good job. One of the first in the community, in the Hmong community to land a professional job

with the top district in the area. But one of the interesting things was that then, in 1993, I was elected to be the president of the Lo society, which is a clan, the Lo clan organization of the United States, but we have a chapter in Wisconsin. And I was the president of that chapter. So, I made every effort to visit all the Lo families in Wisconsin. And then I got to Fond du Lac. I got to Fond du Lac, the leader of my family in the Fond du Lac area said that, 'You know, there's something strange happening here and I'm very angry.' And I said, 'What is it?' And he said, 'Someone wrote a very terrible paper about the Hmong people.' And I said, 'Show me the paper.' So, he showed me the newspaper and it was a member of the council in the city [who] wrote about the Hmong people, the behavior of the Hmong people, they're not clean. They're just here in our country taking our jobs or depending on welfare. And so, this was – their favorite diet is dog and cat. All these things. So, I said to him, 'I'll do something about it.' So, I took the article with me, I came home and I wrote a response. I sent it off to that person and to the newspaper who published the article and this is my response. And so, I sent it to the editor and I quoted everything – the war, the jobs that we have. I addressed the issue in the Fond du Lac area, how the Hmong lived in Fond du Lac area. And then, I talk about the education or the educators in the Hmong community. And then, I put my credential right in there and I sent it off. And one of the students at UW-Oshkosh got hold of the article, showed it to her professor because they were studying Hmong. And showed it to her professor. And her professor was about to retire and they were looking for a faculty member to replace her. So, knowing my credentials, she said the chair of the department, 'You know, we've got to get this guy here. And if he wants to teach, we should interview him. So, she – the professor there – made the call to me saying, 'Hey, I saw you were in the newspaper. You wrote a comment about the situation in Fond du Lac. And we are very pleased with what you wrote. We also noticed your credential as well. Would you like to teach? Have you ever considered teaching?' And I said, 'Yes, I would welcome the opportunity. So, they say, 'Why don't you send in your application and everything that we need to know – resume and things like that – to us and we'll see if you are qualified to be among the finalists to be interviewed.' I sent it in. Everything, sent it in. I did not know the culture of the academic arena yet, so I just thought that it would be just like any other job that I applied for. But I was wrong. But I think it was a good thing because not knowing is better than knowing sometime. So, I sent it in and I went and it was a two-day interview. It was two days interview and I had to teach a class for them to – very similar to what you do here. And lo and behold, I got the job out of – I think there were 15 people competing for the position. I got – and I got the job in 1994. And that was when I was 27. So, you're talking about a kid who came to the United States as refugees with only two words of English in 1980 and then from 1980 to 1992, becomes a professor. That's incredible, right? But one other thing is that that wasn't satisfying me because I kept remembering what Yang Dao told us. And I kept remembering him saying that there has to be more than just working every day. So, I – when I was hired to teach at UW-Oshkosh in the social [studies] department, then I also enrolled at UW-Milwaukee and pursued my PhD. I knew that the higher the degree, the better opportunity [there was] for you out there. So, I went there and I – when you get in to the academic arena, you keep thinking those terms. My plan was to teach, become tenured, become the chair of the department for two years, because that's the requirement. I'm not sure about here, but the requirement in Wisconsin is that you become chair for two years, then you become dean for two years, then you can move to provost. That's where I wanted to end up. I didn't want to be the president of the school, or the chancellor, but I wanted to be a provost. So, I went to UW-Milwaukee and – full-time and then teaching full-time – pursuing my PhD and teaching full-time. And so, I declared my concentration in race, ethnicity and class and study in urban studies. And it's an interdisciplinary degree where it combines economics, sociology, anthropology and history and social work together. So, that means when I graduate with that degree, I could teach history, I could teach sociology, I could teach social work, I could teach

anthropology, I could teach ethnic studies. So, I had five areas that I could apply for if I chose to ever want to get out of social work. But the Lord had started a plan for me. [Interviewer laughs] I wasn't happy with teaching. While I was pursuing my PhD and while I was teaching, something was not fulfilled in my heart. I remember meeting with my faculty members and one of the faculty members said, 'You know, teaching is life.' And I said to myself, sitting there, I said, 'If teaching is life, then I don't want this life. There has to be something better than teaching because teaching certainly is not life.' It's a job – that's what I said. 'But whatever you do, it has to become part of you and this is not who I am.' So, when I was pursuing my PhD, I knew that to move ahead I needed to publish. So, when I was in La Crosse, I already co-published a book with two other colleagues. Now I needed to publish something all by myself, so I orchestrated very carefully my doctoral thesis, that when I finished, I would publish it as a book. And that's what I did. I finished and published it as a book. And so, when I was searching for a publisher, the Windom Press – it's also an academic publishing company – wrote to me saying that we're not going to change anything of your manuscript, but the only thing that's required of our company for internal marketing is that you need a sponsor. Okay? If you could sponsor – if you could find a sponsor that $2,000, for us to help market your book, then we'll publish your book. And then, the University of Hawaii also wanted to pursue the publishing of my book. But at that time I'd said, let's find a sponsor and get my book published. So, I was searching around and then of – my wife and I, we were moving to Minnesota anyway. So, I applied at St. Thomas, applied at St. John's, I applied at the University of Minnesota. And St. John's responds first. St. John's said, 'We want you to come teach for us. What do you need? That's what I asked. 'I want you be the sponsor for my book and I want you to increase my salary and I also want you to give me some research funds. I also want you to see if you could do anything about my current status as associate professor because with the publication, I want tenure.' And so, I was a hard negotiator. And after a year – after I taught in UW-Oshkosh for seven years. So, I knew the culture now. So, I went there with all these proposals and they say, 'You know, we could – no problem. We'll sponsor your publication of your book. We'll increase your salary, but we cannot give you tenure without going through the process. But what we can do is move you from associate – assistant processor to associate professor.' So, at that time, the department was searching – the chair of the department was also on the outgoing. And so, the first round – the negotiation did not go through. So, the first year, I didn't come to St. John's. Then they lost the chair and then they got new guys coming in and then they renegotiated my contract. And then I said, 'Okay. I'll do it.' And so, I accepted the position. And my plan was to become the chair and then become the dean later on. But I lost the opportunity to become the chair. So, when I knew that the department was small, it's too far and I would not be able to become the chair in the time that I'm planning to become, so I accepted the position knowing that I would not be there long. So, I taught at UW – in the University of St. John's at Collegeville for three years. And then, while – before we moved to Minnesota, my wife and I were praying to the Lord, saying, 'Lead us to do what you want us to do now that we are set in our education.' When I finished with my PhD, my wife was also finished with her master degrees and therefore we were pretty much sure that we were set with education. Now, [it was] just about working. And we wanted to serve the Lord. So, we asked the Lord for directions and when we moved here, then he led us to start a Hmong ministry in Brooklyn Park. And we started the Hmong ministry at Grace Lutheran Church. And when we started that, we looked for leaders to lead us. And no one – we couldn't find anyone. So, the members said, 'Why don't <u>you</u> lead us? Why do we need to search for someone? You are a member of the Lutheran Church for so long. You know what we need to do and you know the Word of God better than anyone else. Will you lead us?' So, I said, I will lead a little ministry here for temporary and see how it goes. So, after three years, the ministry needs someone to go on full-time. And so, the district – the Hmong ministry, Grace ministry – Grace members came up with a

plan that I – they would match my salary and let me go into the ministry and attend seminary training to become an ordained pastor for them. So, in 2001, I dropped everything. I dropped everything and then I went into the ministry.

(01:32:20) Which seminary did you attend?
I started attending [Concordia] St. Louis Seminary.
Oh, okay.
Yeah. With the ethic immigrants toward theology track leading to ordination. And they did not – the funding did not come through as we planned it. So, I lost about – I would say, about 30% of my salary when I went into the ministry. My wife then also lost her job because of the issue with the governor about funding – cut for nonprofit organization. Yeah. So, she lost her job and so she decided to go into – personal – small business. She studied [to be a] florist and she opened her flower shop. And so now I'm in the ministry and I can say that this is life. [Pauses] Ministry is life. Ministry is who I am. I've – I would not imagine that I would be happy anywhere besides doing ministry. So, right now, I'm working for North American Mission as the Hmong mission facilitator for North American Mission. So, in that capacity, I – it's my responsibility to start new Hmong ministries across the United States. So, I would travel and meet with districts and mission execs to see how we can start ministry in certain areas. I am also the deacon for the Hmong ministry at Grace Lutheran Church, so I would do Word and Sacraments over there, ministering to them. And then I am also the project director for the Hmong Mission Society, supervising their mission work in Thailand. So, I would travel to Thailand twice a year to do mission work. And I'm scheduled to go there this May to do more mission work. So, we are there and then go to – attending seminary, too. So, it's a continuing learning for me.

(1:34:30) You mentioned earlier that, being with your father and seeing him as a shaman and gaining insight into shamanism and animism have really helped you, as a minister of the Gospel, reach the Hmong people. Do you have any more thoughts on what that linkage is and how you see that as an effective means of evangelizing to the Hmong people?
Yeah. Yeah. It is a very effective in terms evangelism when you understand Hmong religion and how to approach that. Effective doesn't mean that then, after you share the Gospel with them, they become Christian right away. No. Effective means they listen. They listen to you, they ask questions and then, who knows? Only God knows. And only the Holy Spirit works through and to the conversion. My approach is never to condemn the Hmong religion. Never criticize the Hmong religion. When I talk to Hmong people, I say the Hmong religion is good, but it's not good enough to get you to heaven. That's the difference. I say that shamanism is good, but it's temporary. It's not eternal. What you need is eternal power. That only comes through Christ. Christ is the ultimate shaman that can charm the devil and the spirits for eternity. A shaman can get rid of spirits for three days, three months, three years. Then you have to redo it again. Hmong religion does not give you heaven, but gives you eternal suffering and then you reincarnate and you suffer some more. And then you die and then you suffer again. So the cycle is continuing on and on. So, when you could explain to them not to criticize the religion, but to help them see beyond what they already know, meaning spiritual into Christ being the shaman. Christ is the ram that they used to sacrifice, the scapegoat. Christ is the ultimate, the blood that they put on the door. The Hmong do the Passover. They celebrate the Passover every year.
Really.
Yes. Uh-huh. And I said and then they also celebrate the eating of the unleavened bread every year during the Passover, too.' And I said Christ is the unleavened bread. Christ is the bloodstain on the door. When you have Christ, the devil does not enter – the spirit does not enter. But what you do

know is it's out of date. You need Christ. And so, I've seen that it helps people understand more about why we need Christ, why Christianity is important. Yeah. And I highly respect the Hmong culture. And again, it also helped me understand very clearly what's culture and religion. And sometime when they mix the two together, that's where the confusion starts—just like Law and Gospel. You have to understand what Law is and what Gospel is. You have to understand what culture is and then religion is. So, when I talk to Hmong people, I say we are talking about religion. We're not talking about culture. Culture is – connected us together, defines who we are as a Hmong person. But religion is about eternity, about life after death, about your salvation and that's what I want to talk to you about. So, I'm pretty sure that some other Hmong Christians disagree with me. They want to say, 'When you become Christian, it's sort of like you become Jewish.' [Interviewer laughs] But what is Jewish, right? Jews do pretty much the Hmong religion doing. And so, I keep telling my other Christian brothers and sisters of other denominations that, you know, remember, we are not converting the Hmong to become Americanized. We are to share the Gospel so that they become Christian. Christian means belonging to Christ. Belonging to Christ means going to heaven. Not that they will stop be Hmong. They need to be Hmong Christian, not American Christian. So …

(01:39:28) Do you think that's a struggle in the Hmong churches here in the United States? Is there sort of a mixing of American culture with Christianity that becomes problematic for you and for congregations that you visit?

Oh, yeah. Definitely. And that is why I found that the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has the best doctrine to be – to share the Gospel with people. We clearly understand what Law is and Gospel. And that we clearly understand what the people's culture is and the people's religion is. And so, if you understand that, then it's easy and it's – then people want to hear. The other thing is, particularly Reform denomination, they hit hard on the Law and then that means, when you become Christian, you live still under the Law. That means you need to live under American law, mostly. Such as like a wedding. Now, who, what, where is it in the Bible that said that you had to wear white gown, a tuxedo and marry in a church? You don't find that. But when you become Christian, that's how you get married because that's how you see it on TV. American culture, that's what it is. But in the Hmong religion, you have parties of – wedding parties with negotiators, with alcohol and it's a very relational thing. And – but at the same time, the Hmong do mix with spiritual in there, too. So, as a pastor, I want to help them sort through that. Leave out the spiritual thing. Do the human relations thing. Okay? And I know that my colleagues in the Reformed church do not see that. They want to cut everything that is Hmong away. Be an American Christian. That's what they want to do. And I say, 'No. We want to be Hmong Christians, not American Christians.' We are Hmong. We'll be Hmong Christians.

Now, most Hmong Christians are part of the Christian Missionary Alliance Church, aren't they?

Yes.

And I would assume that same problem exists there.

That is – that's a struggle for them. Now, I read through their manual of wedding and funeral service and I totally disagree with them. That would never work in the Hmong community, let alone in my understanding of the Gospel. Because you're totally asking them to lose themselves. So, we disagree. And I'm happy that I'm a member of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and we are able to distinguish Law and Gospel. And those two entities become the core of our teaching.

(01:40:20) What do you pray for regarding your future role in the ministry and what you hope to accomplish in the years to come?

Very interesting question. [Interviewer laughs] You know, in the past, every year in December people making resolutions and I would, too. I would say this year I'm going to do this, do that, do that. But this year, I didn't. I basically said, 'Lord, I'm here. Use me. I'll do whatever you lead me. And my life – it's not about my life. It's in your hands. So, that's what the future is for me is – it's up to the Lord. But what I pray for is that the Lord would use me as a missionary overseas. My wife and I, we are ready to give up everything that we have and be missionaries overseas, wherever He wants us to serve. I think that we – He has blessed us with the understanding of culture and religion from the biblical text, biblical perspective that we could help other people, particularly the Hmong people to grow in Christ and to come to Christ.

So, if you were to live full-time in Thailand, that would be perfect.

Oh, that would be good. [Interviewer laughs] Yeah. And I think that the Lord will lead us to help the synod – our synod – to do more effective ministries. Because the way I see our synod doing ministry here in the United States or overseas somewhere, the way they do mission – not ministry – but the way they do mission is not effective. Just a waste of money.

(01:44:14) If you could build a perfect community for Hmong American Christians in which you were able to keep as much of the Hmong culture and the Hmong associations and the clan influence and maybe other things that you think are appropriate and blend that with your best understanding of Christian practice here on earth, what would that community look like? How would these people behave? What values would they have?

We would still be sinners. [Laughs]

Oh, yes. Yes.

I think you—in the best way possible, we would have better understanding of each other in terms of Hmong who traditionally believe in our religion and then as Hmong who have come to faith in Christ. We would have to understand each other much better, saying, 'that's why you are doing that because that's your faith. I'm do this because of my faith,' and we would compromise, learn to love each other just like the Gospel, saying that love your neighbor as you love yourself. But I don't see that that would be possible because that's not humanly possible.

(01:45:38) But in the church itself, among Hmong Christians, what – do you see all of Hmong culture, apart from just the animistic rituals themselves, being perfectly welcome and perfectly a part of this Hmong Christian community?

You know, that – it's a very difficult thing to say because what I understand is not what you understand. And what I say that it's okay you may disagree. So, there also will be disagreements. But I think if we – have an understanding of each other's culture and religion, then certainly, we appreciate. But the ultimate goal is so that you come to Christ.

(01:46:24) But you were saying earlier – for example, you said, 'In Hmong culture, prior to wedding there is negotiation, there's alcohol, there's – and that's – there's nothing wrong with any of those things being a part of a Hmong Christian community. So, as far as you are concerned, from what I hear you saying, is that there are very few things, if any things, other than the actual animism, that would not be welcome within the Hmong church.

Right.

(01:46:51) Okay. Well, I can't think of any other good questions. But is there anything else that – I think, especially, if you think of Hmong students, maybe, who are in junior high and high school right now and you think of your own experience, having lived in both

worlds, is there any perspective that you would like to convey to them on what your life has taught you about being Hmong and particularly being Hmong in this country?
Sure. I would say to them that—avoid going after things that will make you happy, although, in this life here on earth, what we strive at is to become happy. But because you're still growing up, you don't really know what happiness is. And therefore, my best advice is listen to your parents. Your parents are the only two people that will not harm you, that will not trick you. Your parents are the ones that will cry for you. They will worry about you. What they have for you, you may not think that it's good because it's not fun, because it's not what you want, but knowing that what they have is the best intention for you. And although they may be different in terms of understandings, but always remember that, to reevaluate what you do in light of what your parents said. Giving [an] example, my mother – even still today, my mother treats me like a 10-year-old kid. She always cautions me, 'Be careful what you say to other people. Why would you say that to other people? Why do you do that? Why do you travel a lot? Stay with your family.' And I said, 'Mom, this is my job.' I never said to my mother, 'Mom, I'm almost 40 years old. Give me a break.' But you know what? I'm always her kid. She loves me and the only person that would cry over my dead body is my mother. You know, you – there is a saying that you can lose your wife. You can get a new wife. But you can never get a new mother or a new father. Your mother and your father are always there for you. Even though they may not be there for you physically, their thoughts and their words are always there for you, night and day. So, give your mother and father respect that they deserve and honor them because, by doing that, you also honor yourself and honor the creator, which is God. And without honoring your parent, then you will be lost because you have no guidance. You have no measurement to measure your standard to. And do that with your parents. Granted, some parents are nasty. Some parents are not good. But still yet, honor them, respect them. They may not be good intellectually or you may not have a good relationship with them, but they are your parents and when the worst thing comes, they are right there for you. And so, listen to your parents. Stay in school. And nowadays, with all the economic crises, people don't see education as a valuable thing. People seem to think that a good education may not bring me much money. But education is not about money. If you are thinking about educating and equal amount of money, then you are not very well educated yet. Educating is about the knowledge that you gain, the insight that you have, facing the world head-on. It's not the money that you make. The money comes right along with what you do, and so stay in school, study hard. No one likes to study. That's why very few people are doctors and lawyers. If everybody likes to study and school is easy, we would have doctors and lawyers all over the place. And then, we all would be out of a job. But that is the very reason why you study hard – so that you become one of the exceptional people. Oftentimes, people say that if he can do it, so can I. And I would say the opposite – if he can do it, I'm not sure you can. Because you're not him. If you want to do – to accomplish the thing that he does, you'd better learn what he did and sacrifice, suffer as he did, as she did, so that you can become like him or her. So, don't ever fool yourself that if he can do it, I can do it. And I'll play all day. And I don't focus. I made – and then make – set goals for yourself. I used to set many goals for myself. I was very concrete. One of the goals that I set was, 'I will become – I will have to have a PhD before I turn 35.' I got my PhD when 34. I made professor at the age of 27 because I set a goal. And set goals, set time for them and pursue them. I remember I – when I applied for graduate school, to pursue my PhD, the chair of the department met with me and said, 'So, what's your plan?' I laid out my plan and I said the latest would be five years that I will finish my PhD here. The earliest would be four years. And he said to me that, 'You know, it's a very good plan. Very persistent, but, you know, the best of students here takes more than five years to finish. I just wanted to let you know. And I said to him that, 'You know, I've got things to do, places to go. And I'm going to make sure that I finish, at the latest, five years. Well sure enough, I finished within five years. I'm pretty sure that many of my

classmate are now still trying to finish their dissertation. And so, make plans and be very focused and set time for your plan. And you'll be successful. But the other thing that's very important that I always know and always kept in my heart is no matter how smart you are, not until you know the Lord, you're not very wise.

The fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of the wisdom. And I encourage the youth to look at people who are powerful, who have knowledge, insight to see how many of those are Christian. Those that are Christian are more humble, are more effective leaders. They may not be as prosperous, but they are effective and they're humble. And that what we need to be, is seeking the Lord, His wisdom. That's the beginning of learning…